The City of Lowell

Design Support Resident Focus Groups Moderator's Report

January 2002

Prepared for:

The City of Lowell Department of Planning and Development

Prepared by:

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Introduction

This summary report is based on two focus group sessions that were conducted on December 12, 2001 in Lowell, Massachusetts. A total of 14 Lowell residents age 21 years of age and older participated in these discussions. Participants were recruited to represent a cross-section of adults by age, gender, ethnic background and neighborhood of residence. For more detail on the focus group participants see appendix B.

The purpose of the focus groups was to better understand public sentiment regarding the city of Lowell and identify issues affecting the residents there. Further, our goal was to gain a more full understanding of these issues in "resident" language. Information gathered in this process will be used in the creation of the resident questionnaire designed to quantitatively obtain public perceptions of the city of Lowell.

As with all qualitative research, care should be taken in using the findings and conclusions reported here. No statistical inferences should be drawn from the results of these discussions.

Key Findings Summary

- Residents describe Lowell as a city with a lot to offer in terms of recreational opportunities – sporting events, museums, festivals. At the same time, some express frustration in that more is not offered in the downtown area (such as restaurants or late night activities).
 - Many residents mentioned Lowell's sporting events at the Tsongas Arena and the LeLacheur Ballpark as positive aspects to living in the city. The sporting events are enjoyed by people of all ages and are described as inexpensive, nearby, and easy to get to.
 - Festivals and events were also mentioned as positive aspects of the city.
 Some say the festivals help build relationships in the community by bringing people of all ethnic backgrounds together. It was also mentioned that they add to the economic well-being of the city by making the city a better place to live.
 - Some residents expressed a sense of pride in the historical resources that the
 city offers. They also recognize that these resources have helped the city
 financially by attracting federal funds for improvements, such as the National
 Park designation of the textile mills.
- Most feel the cultural diversity in the city adds a richness to and builds tolerance among the residents. Some feel the different ethnic groups appreciate and sometimes even celebrate the differences among the population. However, there was a mention that different ethnic groups are not always treated fairly by city government.
- Overall, a sense of community and connection with neighbors in Lowell was expressed in the groups.
- Most feel that drug use is one of the biggest issues facing Lowell today.
 Residents feel that they are everywhere in the city. While some feel there has been some progress made in improving the drug situation, several feel that it is not enough. Most feel more police enforcement is needed.
- According to many of the residents, affordable housing is another major issue facing Lowell. Most feel the city could help to improve this situation by imposing and enforcing limits to what landlords charge for rent. Increasing the amount of housing in the city was also mentioned as a possible solution. Separately, some residents are concerned with the density of housing in Lowell.

- Although there is some disagreement regarding the quality of the primary school system in Lowell, many feel the educational opportunities in Lowell benefit the residents by attracting a wide variety of people to the city and offering more intellectual opportunities to the residents. Those who expressed concern for the schools feel the drop-out rate is too high, and the school is not doing enough to improve state standard test scores.
- Closed-mindedness is cited by some residents as an issue facing Lowell. This is an issue for both politicians and residents. A lack of representation of ethnic diversity in politics was mentioned as possibly contributing to this closemindedness.
- Several residents feel that security is also an issue facing Lowell. They feel a
 heightened police presence as well as better lighting in some neighborhoods
 could improve this situation.

Conclusions and Next Steps

As with the community leader interviews, several key themes emerged from the focus groups with residents. Some of the issues are consistent with what we learned from the community leaders, although, there are some additional issues that the residents raised. Specifically residents are concerned with:

- Drugs
- Affordable Housing
- Schools
- Closed-mindedness of politicians and residents
- Security

These issues, along with those raised by the community leaders, will be used to help focus the survey instrument that will be used in the Lowell resident telephone survey. This information will enhance our understanding of the public opinion of the issues facing Lowell today.

Detailed Findings

Image of the City

Group participants were asked to create a story of two individuals who meet on the streets of Lowell. Participants were given a cartoon drawing of two figures and asked to complete the story. This process was designed to uncover the underlying sense of community as well as image of the city of Lowell.

Several of the images focused on what is available in the city in terms of entertainment opportunities such as restaurants, sporting events, and festivals. Some created positive stories to describe what Lowell has to offer.

"A lot of great ethnic areas for food. They are not that fancy but great places."

"A lot of fun places to go... with the ball park."

"Me and my boyfriend going for a date at the coffee mill...a nice day."

"{Two people meet} and ask what is going on at the arena."

Others described frustration with what Lowell has to offer.

"People are unhappy that we don't celebrate First Night anymore."

"...want to go out after the show at the auditorium but nothing is open. Don't have many choices after a show."

A variety of other scenes described residents' frustration with the city, and include:

- Proliferation of drugs on the city streets.
- Intolerance of residents for dogs in the city.
- Apathy among residents in City Council elections.
- Residents clearing snow off of cars onto the city streets after they have been plowed.
- Crowded housing situation in some of the neighborhoods.
- > The difficulty and responsibility of the city in preserving minority cultures.

There appears to be a sense of community or connection with other Lowell residents expressed by some of the participants.

"...either downtown or walking on the boulevard, near some ice cream place. {One resident says to the other} 'Fancy meeting you here!"

"Me and my friend meet... long time friend I haven't seen in a while. It is a small world living in Lowell."

Positive Aspects of the City

Residents feel there are many positive aspects to living in Lowell. Some of the positive aspects mentioned include:

- Sporting events (Tsongas Arena and LeLacheur Ballpark)
- Festivals and events (the Folk Festival, the Cambodian River Festival, Saturday festivals, Monday night concerts)
- > Artist lofts and galleries
- Educational system (from kindergarten to Ph.D.)
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Public transportation (T into Boston, buses)
- Parks and Recreation Department
- Historical resources
- > Textile Museum
- Access to major routes in and out of the city (495 and Route 3)
- Directional signs getting into the city
- > Hospitals and health care system
- Recent additions downtown (the Spa, restaurants)
- ➤ The hotel downtown good place for people to stay and nice walkway that joins the hotel to the MCC
- Good programs for unemployed residents
- Employment opportunities in the region
- Cultural diversity
- > Excellent trash pick-up services
- > Good snow removal services
- Police are nice

Residents were asked what, in their opinion, are the two best things about living in Lowell. The five aspects mentioned most often were: sporting events, cultural diversity, festivals and events, the educational system, and the historical resources of Lowell.

Sporting events

The Tsongas Arena and the LeLacheur Ballpark are seen as very positive additions to the city. They offer fun for people of all ages. Residents enjoy the venues and especially like that the games are easy to get to (as compared to going into Boston) and are inexpensive.

[&]quot;Young kids and families benefit {from the ballpark}."

[&]quot;Management is great."

[&]quot;Very affordable."

[&]quot;Kids love it."

"Everyone in the city benefits from these events."

<u>Cultural diversity</u>

Most participants feel the cultural diversity of the city is a benefit to living in Lowell. They feel the diversity adds richness and builds tolerance among the residents. There also seems to be the feeling that the different ethnic groups appreciate and sometimes even celebrate the differences among other groups.

"Always been a melting pot."

"Cultural diversity is a richness because we learn from one another."

"I am Portuguese... and we have our own festivals but we have people from other ethnic groups that come and join us...they dance...we all have fun."

"I look around the city and I see harmony...we all live as one happy city."

"Kids benefit from working/living with kids who are different."

Festivals and Events

Several residents feel the festivals and events that take place in Lowell contribute positively to the quality of life in Lowell. They feel they help build relationships among the residents particularly in terms of bringing people of different ethnic backgrounds together. They also contribute to the economic well-being of the city by making the city a better place to live.

"There is always something going on."

"All different ethnic groups put some festival on and others come. This helps build relationships."

"Also good for the city economically because the city is getting better and better press."

"All of these things contribute to a better economic base here in the city that makes families want to stay or if they want to go to get a better price for their homes."

Educational system

Some feel the educational system is a positive aspect for Lowell. Although there is some disagreement on the quality of the primary education in Lowell, many feel that having the ability to go from kindergarten through a Ph.D. in Lowell benefits the residents of Lowell. They feel the educational opportunities in Lowell offer more intellectual opportunities and also attract a wide variety of people to the city.

"The engineering school is one of the best."

"You get a wide diversity of students from all over the world."

"Offer more variety, intellectual opportunities to residents that we wouldn't otherwise get."

"{Good schools} offer everyone the opportunity to improve their quality of life."

Historical resources

Several residents feel the historical aspects of the city and its buildings help create a sense of pride in the city. Being a city rich in history has also helped the city financially by attracting things such as the National Park designation of the textile mills.

"When I have company over it is my pleasure to show them around... the old buildings, rivers, old mill buildings...this creates a sense of pride."
"New is not always better."

"On a practical level it brings in money to the city – the National Park designation (of the Textile Mills) is here which has improved the city."

Negative Aspects of the City

Residents were asked what issues and problems are facing Lowell today. Some of the negative aspects mentioned include:

- Condition of roads
- Driving habits of residents
- > Gangs and violence
- Security/safety
- > Drug use
- Schools (drop out rate, sub-standard test scores)
- > Teen pregnancy rate
- Lack of services for the elderly
- Use of foul language by residents
- > Closed-mindedness of residents and politicians
- Lack of cultural representation in city politics
- Affordable housing
- Cleanliness
- Density of housing
- Services for working class (maternity leave programs)
- Lack of shopping opportunities
- Should have no smoking permitted in bars
- Need more food inspection at stores
- > Dissatisfaction with current cable provider
- Current restrictions for park activities
- > Fairness and access to municipal services

Residents were asked what, in their opinion, are the two most important issues or problems facing Lowell today. Drugs, affordable housing, schools, closed-mindedness, and security were issues that were mentioned most often by the residents. Less important, but discussed here, was discontent with the city parks.

Drug Use

Drug use in Lowell was mentioned most often as the biggest issues facing Lowell. Residents feel that drugs are everywhere in the city and are particularly prevalent among children and teenagers.

[&]quot;Drugs are everywhere."

[&]quot;Smoking drugs everywhere and drug houses in neighborhoods."

[&]quot;Bad LSD epidemic on the streets a few years ago."

[&]quot;HBO filmed 'High on Crack Street' in Lowell."

Some feel that the drug situation in Lowell has improved and that the police are working on reducing the amount of drug activity in Lowell.

"They've {police} come a long way...but it is a very big problem."
"Police chief is always on it...You can catch five and you have six more going."
"The community sub-stations and community policing has improved the city immensely but....not good enough."

Despite these efforts, several residents said they feel there needs to be better enforcement by the police to crack down on the situation. Some feel the city could help by increasing the size of the police force in the city and by creating more programs for kids.

"Police are only interested in the big bust."

"No more deals by police and DA for drug dealers... Strict enforcement."

"{Police} need to crack down. I don't believe that the city and the police don't know where it is happening. But with limited resources they have to go everywhere... If there was more money to just go into those neighborhoods...."

"Police need to put pressure on people at night and bust up crack houses."

"Put the D.A.R.E. money into something else."

"The city could do more programs to keep kids involved."

"Be nice to have a larger police force."

A few mentioned that residents could also contribute to the solution by getting more involved.

"Residents need to do more, pay attention."

"There are enough concerned citizens that would help if there was a safe forum for it."

Affordable Housing

Many residents mentioned the lack of affordable housing as one of the most important issues facing Lowell today.

"People are paying more for rent than I pay for my mortgage."

"Have to control those rents."

"People have to work two jobs but still have to share housing."

Most feel the answer to this problem is not building more houses but in providing more low income housing and controlling rents. At least one resident feels building more houses and apartments would be helpful.

"Affordable housing... no regulation or rent control whatsoever. Landlords can charge whatever they want."

"Building more houses is not the answer. The city only has so much space. Got to control those rents."

"No shortage of housing, but shortage of affordable housing."

"Buying a single home is competitive... there is not enough available."

A few mentioned that the large population of students contributes to the problem by driving rents up.

"Landlords rent to students."

"Large population of students...they get top dollar from these kids."

"Maybe the schools can help by building more dorms."

While affordable housing is a concern for most, some are also concerned about the density of housing.

"They are building houses that are so close together."

"Housing that is built now is single family homes...not helping. They are not building triple-deckers anymore."

"I don't want any more buildings. The city could funnel more money for renovating buildings."

"If you keep building more houses, there is not going to be any more green space."

Schools

Other concerns mentioned by several residents pertain to the schools. Several residents feel the drop-out rate is a big issue in Lowell. The quality of education in the schools and particularly that the schools are not reaching the state standards on testing was also mentioned.

"Bad schools affect property values and if you have bad schools, people are not going to be willing to move to your community."

"Kids are going to graduate from the schools {without a good education}. They will stay in Lowell and then we are going to have another whole population of people in the city that have stayed and stayed and stayed and don't have the requisite skills to compete with people who come from other places or who were afforded better education."

Some residents feel the police could help by having a stronger presence on the streets (to halt truancy) while others feel after school programs or smaller classrooms could help.

"During the day if the cops are out and around they could stop the kids and ask them what they are doing."

"Need more after-school programs."

"Perhaps the class sizes are too large. Kids get bored. Maybe need smaller classrooms with more individual attention."

Closed-mindedness

Another issue mentioned is closed-mindedness of both the residents and the politicians in Lowell in that they are not open to new ideas or ways of doing things. The lack of representation of ethnic groups in city leadership was mentioned as a possible link.

"Politicians are resistant to change."

"By closed-mindedness, I mean the lack of cultural representation among the politicians."

"Regressive thinking."

Some feel this lack of openness to new ideas can also be found among residents.

"The fact that we are a multi-cultural city... Some forget that this is the US and that we can't do everything the way we did back home and they can be very closed-minded about it."

"They can't expect the children to learn the same as they did in {our country}."

Security

Security on the streets of Lowell is another issue raised by several people. Some feel there are too many break-ins and looting, particularly in certain neighborhoods such as the Acre. To improve this situation in Lowell, some suggest more police presence and lighting in neighborhoods. One resident suggested surveillance cameras while another suggested renewing a city curfew.

"More cops walking around the street. Physical presence deters break-ins."

One resident expressed some frustration that the police do not respond to certain ethnic groups as quickly as others.

"Police aren't always fair and enforce things equally."
"We need the police but the police don't always work fair."

City Parks

Several residents mentioned some frustration with the Parks and Recreation Department and specifically their management of the city parks. There is some discontent with the restrictions on activities in certain parks. Some feel that the designation of allowable activities within parks is not always appropriate for the area or the neighborhood where the park is located. Some also feel the equipment in the parks is old and needs upgrading.

"Everyone pays tax so any park that belongs to the public, the public should be able to use {it}."

"If we're talking volleyball, put it in a neighborhood that is predominately Cambodian. In the North End they have Bocce courts and it is predominately Italian. The city should look at the population, look at demand, and then loosen it {restrictions in parks} up a little."

"I'd like to see more bathrooms in the larger parks...maybe put in port-apotties in the summer."

"{The swing sets are the same as when I was a kid}."

Appendix A:

Focus Group Screening Questionnaire and Moderator's Guide

Davidson-Peterson Associates 201 Lafayette Center Kennebunk, ME 04043

Design Support Focus Group Screening Questionnaire

Ken wou	nebunk, Nuld like to r	of Davidson-Peterson Associates, a local marketing research firm located in laine. We're working with the city of Lowell to conduct a brief survey on city life, and we ecruit you for a focus group. This is not a sales call and is in no way an attempt to sell The questions will take about 5 minutes of your time.	
		First (Date/Time) Second (Date/Time) Third (Date/Time)	
1.	1. First, are you the male/female head of your household?		
		[] - CONTINUE [] - ASK TO SPEAK TO THE MALE/FEMALE HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD. IF THE HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD IS NOT AVAILABLE OR THIS IS NOT A GOOD TIME TO TALK, ASK FOR A CONVENIENT TIME TO CALL BACK.	
2.	Are you a	year round resident of Lowell?	
		[] - CONTINUE [] - TERMINATE	

3. Which Lowell neighborhood do you live in? [DO NOT READ LIST, SELECT ONE]

Neighborhood		Neighborhood	
The Acre	()	Lower Highlands	()
Back Central	()	Middlesex Village	()
Belvidere	()	Pawtucketville	()
Centraville	()	Riverside	()
Christian Hill	()	Sacred Heart	()
The Highlands	()	South Lowell	()
Lower Belvidere	()	Swede Village	()
		Don't know	()
		Other (Please Specify)	()

QUOTA (Q. 3)

Each group should have at least one-third of its participants from the following neighborhoods; Back Central, the Acre, Lower Highlands, or Lower Belvidere, and at least

one-third of its participants from the following neighborhoods; Pawtucketville, Belvidere, Highlands, South Lowell, or Christian Hill

4.	What type of home do you live in? [READ LIST]		
	Apartment Condominium Duplex Single family home Other	() () () () ()	
5.	Do you own or rent?		
	Own () Rent ()		
6.	Which of the following best de	escribes your race or ethnic background? [READ LIST]	
	White or Caucasian Black, African American Portuguese Hispanic, Latino American Indian Cambodian Other Asian Other (Please Specify)	[] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] []	
	QUOTA		
	Group 1: At least 2 Camb	oodians or Other Asians; At least 2 Portuguese.	
	Group 2: At least 2 Camb	oodians or Other Asians; At least 2 Hispanics/Latinos.	
7.	What is your age?		
	PLEASE RECORD AC	TUAL AGE ABOVE AND MARK THE AGE CATEGORY BELOW	
	18-20 years old 21-24 years old 25-34 years old 35-44 years old 45-54 years old 55-64 years old 65-69 years old 70 or more years old	[] - TERMINATE [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] - TERMINATE	
	DI EASE DECDI IIT AT I E		
	PLEASE RECRUIT AT LE CATEGORIES.	AST 1 OR 2 RESPONDENTS IN EACH OF THE SIX	
8.	CATEGORIES.	der the age of 18 currently living in your household?	

9.	Please stop me when I read the category that includes your total household income.
	Less than \$30,000 [] \$30,000 - \$39,999 [] \$40,000 - \$49,999 [] \$50,000 - \$74,999 [] \$75,000 or more []
10.	One last question—what do you enjoy most about living in Lowell? [WRITE RESPONSE IN DETAIL AND SEE NOTE BELOW]
	[NOTE TO RECRUITERS: ONLY RECRUIT ARTICULATE RESPONDENTS WITH NO HEAVY ACCENTS. RESPONDENTS WHO DO NOT EXPRESS IDEAS CLEARLY AND THOUGHTFULLY CANNOT BE RECRUITED FOR THIS PROJECT.]
11.	RECORD GENDER: 50% OF EACH GENDER IN EACH GROUP
	Male [] Female []
	Group 1: We would like to invite you to participate in a discussion group with other Lowell citizens like yourself. The discussion will last 2 hours. In appreciation for your time, you will receive \$50 for your participation. The group will be held on Wednesday, December 12 th , at 5:30 PM.
	Group 2: We would like to invite you to participate in a discussion group with other Lowell citizens like yourself. The discussion will last 2 hours. In appreciation for your time, you will receive \$50 for your participation. The group will be held on Wednesday, December 12 th , at 7:30 PM.
	Research Foundation - part of the UMass Lowell Research System : General number: 978.453.6586 600 Suffolk Street Second Floor South Lowell, MA
Wo	uld you be interested in attending and sharing your opinions?
	Yes [] - COMPLETE INFORMATION BELOW No [] - THANK AND CONCLUDE
	up 1 [] Wednesday, December 12th at 5:30 PM up 2 [] Wednesday, December 12 th at 7:30 PM

Davidson-Peterson Associates

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Moderator's Guide: Design Focus Groups

I. Introduction (5 minutes)

- > Explain process: Necessity for taping, closed circuit Television
- Explain ground rules: No right or wrong answers, only their honest opinions. Respect each other's opinions. All opinions are important. Although you may be the only person in the group holding a particular opinion, you may represent a significant point of view in the community.
- Finally, please speak up and speak one-at-a-time. Expect everyone's participation.

II. Warm-up (10 minutes)

- I'd like to begin tonight by having each of you tell me a little about yourself:
 - First name, living situation (e.g. living with spouse or significant other, children and their ages, etc.).
 - How long have you lived in Lowell?
 - Have you ever lived outside of Lowell? Where did you live and for how long?

III. Ideal Place to Live (10 minutes)

- We have just been talking about places where you currently live or have lived. Now I would like you to image an ideal place to live.
 - What would this town/city look like?
 - Who lives there?
 - What do the houses look like?
 - What are the neighborhoods like?
 - What does the town provide to its residents?

IV. Creative Exercise -- designed to uncover underlying sense of community and image of the city (20 minutes)

➤ We are now going to play a creative game. I am going to pass around a picture. Present participants with cartoon image of two people talking with each other. The picture is of two people who are having a conversation.

Let's assume these are two people meeting on a street in Lowell. Think for a moment about these two people...

- Who are they?
- What are they wearing?
- Where in Lowell are they?
- What brought them to this spot?
- Do they know each other?
- What are they saying to each other?

Take a few minutes to think about it. If you wish you may write what they are saying to each other on your picture.

Ask each participant to describe his/her picture to the group.

V. Positive Aspects of living in Lowell (15 minutes)

Please think for a moment about all of the good things about Lowell, the things that you like about living in Lowell. I will be writing down some of your thoughts on this flip chart so we can keep track of what you like about Lowell. (Write responses on flip chart)

What about...[Prompt if needed.]

- Neighborhood quality of life
- Municipal services and facilities
- Housing situation
- Traffic and transportation
- Open space
- Cultural and recreational resources
- Availability of businesses and services to meet your needs (retail, restaurants, cleaners, etc.)
- Economic opportunities (careers/jobs)
- Now think for a minute about all the positive aspects that we've listed up here. In **your opinion**, what are the two best things about living in Lowell? Please use the pads of paper in front of you to write down your top two picks. (Have each participant read their two. Check the topics as they are mentioned to develop top five list. Circle the top five choices on the board.).
- Let's take some time to talk in-depth about the five positive aspects that were chosen most often.

For each positive aspect:

- Why is this a positive feature of the city?
- Does this improve life in Lowell? How so?
- Who benefits most from this?

VI. Issues/Problems facing Lowell (30 minutes)

Let's change gears a bit and talk about the issues and problems facing Lowell.

Again, I will write down the problems and issues facing the city so we can keep track of what you don't like about the city of Lowell. (Write responses on flip chart)

What about...[Prompt if needed.]

- Neighborhood quality of life
- Municipal services and facilities
- Housing situation
- Traffic and transportation
- Open space
- Cultural and recreational resources
- Availability of businesses and services to meet your needs (retail, restaurants, cleaners, etc.)
- Economic opportunities (careers/jobs)
- Now think for a minute about all the problems and issues that we've listed. In **your opinion**, what are the two most important issues or problems now facing Lowell? Please write down the two that you feel are the most important. (Have each participant read their two. Check the topics as they are mentioned to develop top five list. Circle the top five choices on the board.).
- Let's take some time to talk in-depth about the five most important issues/problems facing Lowell today.

For each issue/problem:

- Why is this problem so important?
- How does it affect life in Lowell?
- Who does this problem most affect?

VII. Possible Solution to Problems (15 minutes)

➤ I would like to go back through the top-five list of issues/problems with the City of Lowell. Please think about what could be done to improve the situation with regard to each issue.

For each issue/problem:

- Is there any way to improve this situation?
- What can the residents of Lowell do to improve this situation?
- What can city officials do to improve this situation?
- Do you feel that anyone is currently addressing this situation? If so, how? If not, why not?

VIII. Closing Comments and Questions from Observers (Time Permitting) (5 minutes)

Appendix B: Participant Details

Participant Details

Income	Number of Participants Total = 14
Less than \$30,000 \$30,000 - \$39,999 \$40,000 - \$49,9999 \$50,000 - \$75,000 More than \$75,000 Refused	1 3 3 3 2 2
Age 21-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65-69	0 4 2 4 4 0
Children under 18 living in household Yes No	6 8
Gender Male Female	7 7
Living Situation Own home House Apartment Rent Apartment Duplex Other	9 8 1 5 2 2 1
Ethnic Background Caucasian Cambodian Portuguese	10 2 2
Neighborhood Centraville The Acre South Lowell The Highlands Back Central	3 3 3 3 2